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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PANAMA 000959

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN PIERCE, G/TIP OWEN, WHA/PPC/PUCCETTI
FALLS
SOUTHCOS ALSO FOR POLAD

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SUBJECT: PANAMA ARRESTS EIGHT DARIEN POLICE IN TIP
CORRUPTION CASE

REF: PANAMA 0608

Classified By: DCM Christopher McMullen for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a vital advance of Panama's anti-TIP agenda, in late March Anti-corruption Prosecutor Maribel Cornejo detained eight National Police (PNP) officers and one private citizen on charges of rape, commercial sexual exploitation, and corruption of minors in Darien Province. The alleged victims were under-age indigenous girls. By indicting several high-ranking officers, the GOP signaled that the PNP must respect anti-TIP norms. The case also has focused GOP attention on indigenous cultural practices that may encourage sexual exploitation. Attorney General Gomez, a staunch anti-TIP ally and human rights advocate, showed moral resolve and political finesse in pursuing a sensitive case (see reftel). Despite and perhaps because of the potential for bad press, the Ministry of Government and Justice (MOGJ), which oversees the PNP, proactively cooperated with the Attorney General's office in the investigation and apprehension of the officers. Embassy immediately congratulated the Attorney General and her office both publicly and privately, stressed to the MOGJ and the PNP the seriousness of the charges and the need for continued cooperation, and pushed PNP and MOGJ to pursue activities to prevent future abuses. Embassy continues to provide substantial material and technical support to the PNP in the Darien and will closely monitor this key TIP case. End Summary.

Officers Accused of Corruption of Minors, Rape

2. (C) In late March, Prosecutor Cornejo demonstrated the Attorney General's moral resolve in combating TIP and PNP corruption by ordering the detention of eight PNP officers and one civilian in a sensitive internal sex trafficking case. (Note: The Attorney General had transferred the case to Prosecutor Cornejo in February from Darien Prosecutor Arnesia Janeth Torrero, who later received death threats (reftel). End Note.)

3. (C) Prosecutor Cornejo charged a PNP major, three captains, a second lieutenant, a corporal, and two unranked officers with committing sex crimes against some 10 indigenous minor girls. Cornejo told PolOff that seven of the eight officers committed "corruption of minors" because they met the girls in bars, gave them alcohol, and then had sex with one or more of them. Cornejo detained the other officer for statutory rape because the victim was under 12 years old. The PNP officers are not from indigenous communities.

4. (C) While Prosecutor Cornejo told PolOff she could not disclose the names of the accused, she did not refute the involvement of the following individuals identified by the press: Major Javier Arauz, Captain Reymundo Barroso, Captain Julio Aizprua, and Captain Anibal Prado.

Civilian Woman Acted as Madam

5. (C) Prosecutor Cornejo also charged a 24-year-old civilian woman for pimping. The woman allegedly paid the girls to have sex with Darien teachers, police officers, and others. The Attorney General's office did not charge any of these offenders as part of the immediate case.

Indigenous Leaders' Cut?

6. (C) While Prosecutor Cornejo denied having evidence against indigenous leaders, MOGJ Minister Aleman told EmbOff that Darien indigenous leaders commonly offer minor girls for sex for \$100. Aleman said that the initial complaints in this case came after local indigenous leaders did not receive their expected pay-offs from the PNP.

7. (C) Other Darien contacts claim indigenous families see

minor girls as a means to generate income for the family through marriage or sexual encounters. However, Prosecutor Cornejo denied that her case involved parents offering their daughters for sex.

Full MOGJ Cooperation

18. (C) Prosecutor Cornejo told Embassy that the MOGJ cooperated fully with the Attorney General's office in the lead-up to the arrests. MOGJ Minister Aleman told EmbOff that Attorney General Gomez initially had planned to fly to the Darien for high-profile arrests but called off her plans when MOGJ convinced her to let it pursue its own investigation first. That would allow MOGJ to take a proactive stance against PNP corruption.

19. (SBU) Aleman noted that he immediately sent a National Maritime Service (SMN) Intelligence Unit to the Darien to investigate. Subsequently, the PNP's Investigations Office (DIIP) detained the officers and insured that they arrived at the Attorney General's Office to provide Cornejo with their initial statements on March 28. In the end, the MOGJ was the first GOP agency to inform the press, issuing a press release on March 29. PNP Internal Affairs (DRP) handed over its own case against the officers to the PNP Disciplinary Board on March 31.

Embassy Commends Attorney General

10. (SBU) Once the case became public on March 29, Embassy took swift action. EmbOffs personally congratulated Attorney General Gomez and her staff on the arrests. Ambassador Watt also commended the Attorney General in a formal letter. The Ambassador publicly highlighted the GOP's work in combating TIP at Embassy's April 7 Women's Day event, which the Attorney General attended.

Embassy Encourages MOGJ, PNP Cooperation

11. (SBU) In addition, EmbOffs told MOGJ Minister Aleman, MOGJ Secretary General Danilo Toro, Ministry of the Presidency Security Council Director Javier Martinez Acha, and PNP Subdirector Cerezo that the U.S. views the charges against the PNP officers as extremely serious, underscored the importance of the PNP's full cooperation at all stages of the prosecution, and offered technical and financial assistance in implementing prevention measures.

Embassy Support for Prevention Activities

12. (SBU) To that end, Embassy's Narcotics Affairs Section agreed to fund a MOGJ pamphlet designed to put all PNP officers on notice that sexual abuse of and corruption of minors will be swiftly and severely punished. The pamphlet will be attached to the paycheck of every PNP officer, who will be required to sign a statement acknowledging they understand the pamphlet's contents.

13. (SBU) MOGJ Secretary General Toro also told Embassy that MOGJ will place notices in all PNP barracks warning that committing sex crimes against minors will be punished to the fullest extent of the law.

COMMENT

14. (C) Thus far, the GOP has proactively pursued this sensitive case. The Attorney General's Office has vigorously investigated and prosecuted the accused. Similarly, the MOGJ and PNP leadership has supported the Attorney General's Office and taken steps to prevent any recurrences of PNP abuse. So far, public outcry over the case has been muted, as the press and public seem to recognize the GOP's initiative. Embassy will continue to follow up to ensure that GOP commitment to the case does not wane over time.

MCMULLEN